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MATTER: A DIVINE PERFECTION?

Stephen H. Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012. \$70/£40. pp. 343. ISBN: 978-0-19-982795-4).

This book is an extended exposition and defence of ‘heavenly flesh Christology’—the idea that, prior to his incarnation, Jesus Christ was embodied. Behind it is a desire to contest the immaterialism that is too often the default theology of Christianity: that matter is bad, and that purity and eternity entail disembodiment. Quantum physics and philosophy, however, are currently revealing a Platonic, respiritualized matter that is far removed from the atomism of modernity. Theologians can no longer seek refuge in a crude Enlightenment materialism; rather, a fully Christological conception of matter is required.

Drawing on the Transfiguration, Stoic seminal reasons, Tertullian’s embodiment of the eternal Word, Irenaeus’ recapitulation, Apollinarian adoration of Christic flesh, Hilary of Poitiers’ universal substratum, Scotist *haecceity* and Lutheran ubiquity, Stephen Webb constructs in his book’s first half a genealogy in which Jesus’ flesh is not ultimately from Mary but from God. The incarnation is thereby not the insemination of a passive female body by an immaterial divine spirit, but the condensation or intensification of divine being into a body that has already been prepared in heaven (Heb. 10.5).

The book’s second half includes long chapters on Aquinas and Barth, the importance of which is not entirely clear. Moreover, its casual subtitles and sometimes breathless style might grate on some readers. Nevertheless, it culminates in a striking Barthian defence of Mormonism, or more precisely, of the Mormon doctrines of divine omnipresence and materiality. Drawing on *Church Dogmatics* II/1, Webb persuasively demonstrates the orthodoxy of the views that God, being the creator of space, possesses a distinct, preeminent space, which in Christ becomes coextensive with creaturely space. Moreover, God’s essence in Christ is anthropomorphic and corporeal. From here, Webb suggests, it is but a small step to a Mormon view of matter as having its origin in Christ but as being, in its perfected form, an eternal divine attribute.

How many associated Mormon beliefs would Webb wish to accept? Is matter eternal, for instance, or is heavenly flesh Christology compatible with a classic doctrine of creation out of nothing? Interesting points arise from eucharistic theology and could have been given more space. Nonetheless, this study is refreshingly provocative and counterintuitive and undoubtedly merits attention.

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